

A Bit of Missionary Heaven

By Steven Hunt

One rainy night in late November 1973, my companion and I were tracting in Manila, the Philippines, and we knocked on the door of Romeo and Naty Bautista. They let us in and listened politely to our short message. Naty didn't speak English (and we only taught in English at that time), but Romeo did and was interested in having us come back. He also said that his younger sister, Avelia, who was living with them while going to college in Manila, would probably be interested.

As excited as young missionaries can be about new investigators, we eagerly waited for the return appointment several days later. The lesson went so well that we could hardly believe it. Romeo and Avelia listened attentively and asked questions. Naty listened but didn't understand much of what we said. They were all receptive from the very beginning—a missionary's dream!

After we left each lesson, Romeo would teach the lesson to his wife in Tagalog. They read the Book of Mormon in English together, slowly. They had two young daughters at the time: Ruth, a toddler, and Namie, a new baby.



Naty and Romeo Bautista with their children in 1973.

In December 1973, I was fortunate to baptize and confirm Romeo and his sister Avelia. My companion and I were thrilled at the family's faith and interest in the gospel, but we never could have predicted the eternal impact of their decision and the countless lives that would be blessed both immediately and years down the road.

Romeo and Avelia became faithful and strong members of the Makati Branch from the start. Soon after their baptisms, I returned home to Salt Lake City, Utah. In my excitement to come home, I didn't even get

Romeo's mailing address to write a letter. There was no internet or cell phones in those days.

I soon met Susan, my eternal sweetheart. I taught, baptized, and married her in 1975, and we were sealed in the Salt Lake Temple in 1976. We had three children and became involved in various Church callings. I was also very involved in our family business. I often thought about the Bautista family and how they were doing, but I didn't know of any way to contact them.

Then one special day in 1997, I received a letter from a Mrs. Avelia Wijtenberg, postmarked from Mackay,



Queensland, Australia! I didn't know any such person there, but when I read the letter, I learned that Romeo's sister Avelia had met and married a Dutch-Australian man and had been living in Queensland for some years. She had found my old mailing address in her notebook one day while doing some spring cleaning.

Avelia and I began a letter-writing campaign, eager to know about what had happened to each other over the past several decades. She was also able to give me a mailing address for Romeo, who had moved to Tiwi, in the southern part of Luzon Island in the Philippines.

That year, as Romeo and I wrote back and forth, after 24 years of no contact, our old relationship was rekindled. Romeo said that he and Naty now had five children. Naty and the rest of the family had been baptized in the years after I returned home. Their eldest, Ruth, had served a mission in the Philippines Davao Mission, and the second and third daughters, Namie and Joan, were serving missions in northern Luzon and Guam, respectively. They had a fourth daughter, Lyn, who later served in the Philippines Baguio Mission, and finally, a son, John,



The Bautista family on the day of their sealing in the Manila Philippines Temple.

who later served in the Philippines Cagayan de Oro Mission.

My wife and I requested the addresses of Namie and Joan and wrote to them on their missions. We had never met them and didn't know them at all but felt such an instant bond that is difficult to describe in

words. It was almost as though they were our own daughters! Through our letters, we rekindled a love for the Bautista family and especially for Namie and Joan—who were full of the Spirit, working hard as full-time missionaries. In a letter, Namie asked if she could telephone us on Christmas Day, as her parents didn't have a telephone at the time. With the approval of her mission president, she called on Christmas Day in 1997, and we both just cried for several minutes. I then reminded her that an international long-distance collect call was too expensive to waste just crying to each other. We laughed and had a wonderful conversation, even with her limited English skills. She invited us to come to the Philippines the following summer for her homecoming talk.

In the summer of 1998, as Namie returned home from her mission, I made plans with my 16-year-old daughter

to go to the Philippines. We arrived in Manila and met with Ruth. We attended the Manila Philippines Temple together. Then we flew south to her family's home in Tiwi. It's impossible to describe the joy of seeing Romeo and his family again. The deep bond of brotherhood was instantly renewed. We talked and hugged and reminisced; we ate together and read scriptures with his family each night we were there. They were such strong rocks of testimony in their small branch. We attended sacrament meeting in the Tiwi Branch and listened to Namie report on her mission. It was amazing. It was nearly celestial. Truly this was missionary heaven.

At that time, Romeo was serving as the branch president of the Tiwi Branch. He had been instrumental in bringing the gospel to his extended family in northern Luzon. Romeo took his family to the temple, where Naty and their children were sealed. Now all five of the children have been married and sealed in the Manila Temple. Several married returned missionaries. Joan was instrumental in converting her boyfriend. She waited with him for a year after his baptism and then married him in the Manila Temple. Naty died suddenly in 2007, but the family remained strongly

rooted in the gospel. They are thankful for the sealing covenant and know they will see their beautiful wife and mother again if they are faithful.

Now there are more than 70 members of the Bautista family who are active in the Church. The family and extended family have accounted for 17 full-time missions and 14 temple marriages. Family members have also served as bishops and branch presidents; stake and district presidents; and Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary presidents and counselors! Romeo's son, John,

was a bishop in the Quezon City area. Ruth's husband was a high councilor in that same stake. Lyn's husband was also a branch president in Tiwi. The Bautista family surely is building a strong legacy of service and strength in the Philippines.

My wife and I served a senior mission in the Philippines San Pablo Mission from 2008 to 2010. One day at the temple in Manila, most of the Bautista family gathered for the marriage of John Bautista (Romeo's son) to Sister Victorino, one of the sister missionaries from our San Pablo Mission who had completed her mission and recently returned home.

Our mission president asked if we would like to attend that joyous event, and we immediately made plans to be there. My wife knew of my relationship with the Bautista family but was completely blown away by how many family members there were and how much they loved her. She had 70 new friends for life.

I often think of Doctrine and Covenants 18:15: "And if it so be that you should labor all your days in crying repentance unto this people, and bring, save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father!" Like a

ripple in a pond, the influence of one soul, Romeo, has sent out waves of strong testimonies and Church service in the Philippines.

I was fortunate to help toss the pebble into the pond four decades ago with the baptisms of Romeo and Avelia. I have experienced unspeakable joy in my relationship with this great family, now into their third generation of gospel living. This is truly the ongoing legacy and joy of missionary work. This is a little bit of missionary heaven! ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.



When I met Romeo again in 1998, our deep bond of brotherhood was instantly renewed.